GENDER ASSIGNMENT

You begin life in your family with a gender assignment. This happens as soon as your parents are told their new baby is a boy or a girl. Gender-related events start at once. For example, parents choose a name they think is appropriate for a son or for a daughter. For years girl babies were routinely issued pink accessories and boy babies blue accessories in the hospital. Gender could be told by the color of a baby’s blanket and identification bracelet. Today, it is not always that easy.

GENDER IDENTITY

In contrast with sexual identity, which is a biological trait determined by your genes, *gender identity* is acquired in the course of building a self-image. Gender identity refers to your feeling about being male ore female. It is related to your feelings and your behaviour.

Gender identity is established by demonstrating what a culture considers to be “sex-appropriate” behaviour, that is, what it considers to be “feminine” or “masculine” behaviour. This may include behaviour related to food, clothing, shelter, and furnishings as well as interpersonal behaviour. Any of these can assume a genderized character. For example, “meat and potatoes” has been considered to be a “man’s” meal even though it may be a favourite meal of many women, too. We have “men’s” and “women’s” fashions. We have different ideas about scents and accessories that are appropriate for each sex. We decorate rooms for men and women differently. Inanimate objects of many kinds contribute to our idea of our self-image and our gender identity.

STAGES OF GENDER IDENTITY

Gender identity develops in a series of related stages. First, others label the child. Then the child labels himself or herself. Next the child prefers the gender attributes of one sex. Lastly the child adopts the behaviour considered appropriate for one or the other sex.

***Gender Labeling*** Significant others communicate gender messages to a child in a number of ways. They may even use different tones of voice and different language to talk to boys and girls. They communicate gender messages both verbally and nonverbally. They may toss a boy in the air and hold a girl on their lap. They label the child as a “big boy” or a “pretty girl”. When this happens often enough, it is built into the child’s self-image. When the same type of behaviour is used over and over again for one sex and not the other, it is call sex stereotyping. Sex stereotyping does not give the individual the opportunity to develop the full range of his or her human potential. For this reason, people are now trying to be more flexible in their gender-labeling activities in child rearing.

**How Stereotypes Operate**

The word “stereotype” has been used since the early 1800s to mean a mold that printers use to shape letters. Whatever you pour into the mold comes out the same. In a book called *Public Opinion* published in 1922, journalist Walter Lippmann took the old word and used it in a new way to mean a fixed and unchanging perception of something – of a person or a group of people, for example. People who think in stereotypes make prejudgments. They habitually interpret what they see in prescribed ways, without taking individual differences into account.

In its new sense the word was first applied to prejudgments about religious, racial, and ethnic groups. Stereotypes related to ethnic or racial origin are the basis of *racism*. Stereotypes related to age are the basis or *agism*. Stereotypes related to gender are the basis of *sexism*. Sex-role stereotypes force girls and boys into predetermined roles irrespective of their individual talents and abilities.

Why are stereotypes hard to change? Because people have gotten used to thinking that way. It has become a habit. They don’t want to be “shook up” by examining their illogical ideas. These ideas may be a device for building their own egos by putting other people down. People are slow to change a stereotyped viewpoint. They need to gain insight into themselves. When their self-image improves they may be less likely to downgrade others.

***Self-labeling***  When a child learns language, gender enters into the picture. Our grammar is genderized. The child labels himself or herself as a boy or girl and does not like to have people mislabel her or him. The child’s body image and personal environment carry gender messages. Children’s clothes, toys, and other possessions are genderized. Even is parents try to raise their children with a degree of gender neutrality, the outside world continues to influence a child’s perception of gender. Sex stereotyping labels certain objects and activities “for girls only” or “for boys only”.

***Gender Role Preference*** Children soon learn that gender traits are rated differently. In many families the preferred sex for a first child is male. Males continue to enjoy privileged status. This leads to male dominance and gives men many advantages over women. This explains why, when asked, little girls often say they would prefer to be boys. Adults should interpret this to mean that girls would like the same privileges they see boys getting. However, if a boy sees advantages in being female, he may say, “I want to be a mommy”. Such comments are less sexual than social. They tell us that children learn to value what adults who are important to them (significant others) value. Conversely, they devalue what those people devalue.

***Gender Role Adoption*** Acting in ways that corresponds to accepted gender behaviour is referred to as gender role adoption. It applies only to a child’s (or an adult’s) observable behaviour. It does not necessarily correspond with the individual’s feeling about the role, or self-labeling. Some research suggests that flexible attitudes toward gender role performance relieve individuals of the necessity to adopt aspects of gender role that “feel” uncomfortable. Gender identity is reinforced over the human life cycle in both the family context and the wider social context.

**Gender Differences in Three Cultures**

Anthropologist Margaret Mead did a ground-breaking study in which she compared gender roles in three New Guinea tribes. Among a tribe called the Arapesh she found men as well as women trained to be cooperative, unaggressive, and responsive to the needs of others.

A very different pattern was observed among the Mundugumor. Both men and women were socialized to be fierce, ruthless, and aggressive. The nurturing aspects of personality were discouraged in both males and females. “Maternal love” as we conceive it was unknown among the Mundugumor.

In the third tribe, the Tchambuli, Dr. Mead found a reversal of the sex roles considered traditional in the West. Women were domineering, managerial, and impersonal. Men were fond of personal display and emotionally dependent on their stronger partners. As a result of Mead’s pioneering work, many assumptions about the inevitability of gender roles had to be reconsidered.